Opinion

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This historical relic is being abused badly

Bill Frank

See this picture of an early Delaware log cabin?

It's supposed to be a historical relic, dating to Swedish settlers in present day Wilmington who introduced the log cabin to the United States as a style of architecture that became a symbol of American frontier living.

But if the early Swedes were to return today and see it, they'd brand it as a slum house, unfit for human habitation in its present condition. Just as unfit as so many houses up the street in the present vicinity of Old Swedes Church.

The sad truth is that even as a historical relic, the cabin, now

Cabins such as the one in Fort Christina State Park became the models for the architectural style used on the American frontier

Staff photo by Leo S. Matkins

owned by the state, is in bad shape due to neglect and vandalism.

The cabin was donated about 10 years ago by the Fenimore family of what used to be Prices Corner near Elsmere.

The cabin, which once stood at Prices Corner, is now in the custody of the Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs. It is now in Fort Christina State Park on East Seventh Street, not far from Old Swedes Church.

I'm sure the Fenimores expected the state, with its supposed devotion to Delaware heritage, tradition, history, etc., to maintain the cabin in some decent kind of condition for visitors to look and marvel at.

Bad as the cabin looks today, it was much worse and untidier last week before a maintenance crew of the Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs arrived to spruce up the park for last Sunday's observance of Swedish Colonial Day as proclaimed by Gov. du Pont.

Last week, the cabin floor was filthy, covered with all kinds of debris. Some of the logs of the wall were out of place and the roof — well you can still see what's happened to the roof. It is still opened to the elements, rain, storm, snow and sleet.

But before the Delaware Swedish Colonial Society held its annual memorial Sunday at Fort Christina Park, the cradle of Wilmington, the cabin had been swept clean and the log wall dressed up as well as possible.

Incidentally, March 29, 1638, is the accepted date when the Swedish settlers arrived at the site of the present park to establish Sweden's foothold in the new world.

And in 1938, President Roosevelt and Swedish royalty gathered there to dedicate the park and its famous Carl Milles monument that was given to the people of the United States by the people of Sweden in commemoration of the settlers.

The cabin is an important part of Fort Christina Park because its style in the United States dates to the era of the Swedish and Finnish settlers of the middle 17th Century.

Noted Delaware historian Clinton A. Weslager was responsible for much of the research that traced the American log cabin to the shores of the Christina River and present day Wilmington .

Not too many authentic old log cabins are still around. One, by the way, is preserved in the state museum in Dover.

The Fenimore family gift at Fort Christina Park, even in its present condition, is an excellent example of how the pioneers lived; one room with a fireplace and a loft for a bedroom.

The cabin in the park started to disintegrate about five years ago, principally because of lack of funds to maintain it properly and also because vandals have had a way of invading the park, despite its high walls and iron fence, and playing havoc with the small building.

It's a wonder it hasn't been set afire. And of course, once a flame is applied, the cabin would zoom up in a blaze in no time.

Several years ago, I suggested to Weslager that perhaps we ought to give Fort Christina State Park back to the Indians, original owners of the site.

He laughed and replied:

"The Indians wouldn't take it back, not unless we paid them more than what they were paid for the site of Wilmington and that included a couple of rusty guns, a couple of kettles and a blanket or two."

There's no question about it. It takes money and personnel to safeguard such a shrine as Fort Christina State Park with its precious monument, the log cabin, park benches, flagstone walks and lighting fixtures.

When Ronald Finch was director of the Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs, he made an effort to get sufficient federal funds for the upkeep and safeguarding of the park and its monument. His was a good argument, in that the Carl Milles monument really belongs to the United States, having been accepted in 1938 by the president of the United States.

But Finch didn't get anywhere.

Maybe it would be a good idea to serve notice on the United States that unless it comes forward with some money to protect and maintain the park and its monument, Delaware will ship the monument back to Sweden, return the log cabin to the Fenimore family and plow up the the park so it will be more in keeping with its dismal surroundings on the Christina River banks.

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